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Original Research Paper

What Lies Beneath? An exploration of Secrets held by Urban Youth

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ABSTRACT

Every day in life one may have myriad experiences, however, there may be some events or thoughts that an individual may choose not to share it with anyone. This ability to keep the information to ourselves, is not an easy process and is an active intentional cognitive process. Secrets is something that each individual has, however, there has been a lack of empirical interest in this topic. What may be the function of this process and does it have any links to developmental stages or does it inform any aspects of counseling? In an exploratory study, secrets from 172 participants were collected and analyzed. The results provide evidence that suggests secrets may have a developmental basis. Further, the feelings associated with secrets are negative, thus providing support for our contention that the events precipitating the secret have their source in the shadow archetypes.

Keywords: *Secrets, Psychoanalysis*

Secrets have formed the bases of countless legends, myths, literary works and, of course, real-life human drama. Secrets exist in a kind of psychological “no man’s land”, twilight world on the border of knowing and not knowing. Unlike the unconscious processes proposed by Freud (1984), secrets may lie within the ambit of an individual’s awareness. While it may neither repressed nor denied, it is something that the holder would rather did not exist. For a phenomenon that is so ubiquitous, very little research has been done to understand it. Some work has explored the role of personality and the cognitive process in secret keeping (e.g. Gesell, 1999). What then is the psychological function that secret may support? Is there a purpose for its existence, or is it just a phenomenon that exists with very little purpose?

What is a Secret?

The key aspect defining the secret is the belief of harm that may follow disclosure. Secrecy has been defined as a process involving intentional deception (Lang and Wegner, 1995). For purposes of this study, secrets were defined as information that an individual *volitionally*

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withholds from others due to individual beliefs about possible damage that may follow the disclosure of this information. Typically, the threat maybe one of harm to the individual's sense of self in the eyes of others. From a psychotherapy per se, keeping a secret may have been associated with distress and revealing it has been suggested to be often therapeutic (Frank & Frank, 1991; Stiles, 1987). To understand the role of secrets, empirical research is necessary to comprehend their nature and function (if any). Specifically, to understand what is kept secret, and why it is kept secret?

Some questions that need answers may include, what content from one's everyday life is often kept secret and why is that kept close to one's heart? There is an active cognitive process that may underlie the ability to keep any information 'secret'. The preoccupation model of secrecy proposes that there is an intentional suppression of the secret thought (Lane & Wegner, 1995). The process of thought suppression or motivated forgetting has been anecdotally reports in clinical reports since Freud termed the ability to *actively inhibit* unpleasant memories as repression (Freud, 1917). Only in recent years' cognitive psychologist have been interested in in empirically understanding the process of actively inhibiting unwanted memories (Wegner, 1994; Wegner, Schneider, Carter & White, 1987; Hansylmer & Anderson, 2014). While from a clinical perspective there have been anecdotal reports about traumatic experience or case-studies, which may not necessarily provide a complete picture. Understanding the function of secrets and the process it serves may help bridge the gap in understanding the role of motivated forgetting or inhibiting unwanted memory in everyday life.

An obvious function of secrets may be the preservation of the self-image, while there may be other, more important reasons, for the existence of this phenomenon.

The Nature of Secrets

Erikson (1963) viewed development as a search for identity and proposed eight fundamental conflicts, at various stages of development that have to be resolved. At each of these stages, when the conflict is satisfactorily resolved, the individual develops a virtue. The virtues developed at a previous stage arm the person to tackle the conflict that lies ahead. Myriad experiences go into the development of these virtues; some strengthening the sense of self and others weakening it. These experiences are typical of the developmental stage the individual is at (Erikson, 1963).

Our sense of identity and development of our personality may be an ongoing process through one's lifetime. Consequently, the hypothesis for this exploratory study was that thematically similar secrets may be obtained from individuals of the same age. The content of the secret was thought to pertain to those experiences that may characterize the developmental conflict faced by them.

The study also proposed that the secrets of individuals of the same age would consist of those experiences that are contrary to the cultural traditions in a society (Erickson, 1963, p. 95).

Disclosure of these experiences (that trespass societal norms) may be threatening, to the extent that it escalates rather than resolves, the conflict.

The Function of Secrets

Jungian theory conceptualizes the psyche as being made up of many distinct but interactive aspects. Jung distinguished between the *collective* and *personal unconscious*. While the personal unconscious contains material based on the unique experiences of the individual, the collective unconscious is the reservoir of the *archetypes*. An archetype is a universal thought form or idea that contains a large element of emotion. These archetypes may be universal or culture specific. The *persona* is referred to a mask adopted by the person in response to the demands of social convention and tradition, and inner archetypal needs (Jung, 1964). In a sense, the persona is usually a manifestation of the archetypes of the society's collective, and not what the person really is. An individual identifying excessively with the persona becomes a lifeless caricature of the 'perfect being' that society expects.

The secret, being antithetical to the persona, prevents the individual from over-identifying with it. To that extent, it may enhance the sense of individuality or *self*. If the persona is the manifestation of those archetypes that are acceptable to society, it would follow that there are several other archetypes that are denied and repressed. These *shadow* archetypal figures cause the individual to behave in ways that are contrary to the persona. The individual, identifying with these shadow figures as compensation against the identification with the persona, may experience negative feelings such as guilt, regret, shame, and the like.

The current study was designed to explore the secrets of youth and the possible psychological function of secrets. More specifically, it was hypothesized that the secrets of particular age groups would contain thematically similar material that may be reflective of that developmental stage. Further, it was also hypothesized that the feelings associated with the secret may be predominantly negative.

METHODOLOGY

Participants: Three hundred and forty-seven college students (males = 151; females = 196) from Mumbai (India) were invited to fill out the single sheet research instrument. One hundred and seventy-two people (females = 114) participated in the study. Ten response sheets were returned incomplete without information on gender (n = 2) and age (n = 8), which were excluded from the data analysis.

Design

The response sheet had the following instructions: "*We are interested in finding out the kinds of secrets that young people have. We would appreciate it if you would share at least one of your secrets with us. You may share more than one if you wish. In the space provided below, please write down one (or more) of your secrets in as much detail as possible*". Subjects were asked to indicate the people involved, their feelings when the incident occurred, whom they shared it with, and how they felt about it now and why they chose to keep it a secret. To

ensure voluntary participation, the following statement was included: “Please remember that all information you give us will be treated as highly confidential and will be used only for research purposes. If you choose not to participate in this research, please return the blank form”.

Completed response sheets were collected in a container, to ensure anonymity. In this manner, we were able to collect 184 secrets from 172 respondents. Five persons did not report any secrets and 16 persons reported more than one secret.

RESULTS

The sample consisted of significantly more females than males ($\chi^2 = 25.46$; $p < .0001$). There was no significant difference in the mean ages of males and females (19.07 and 18.77 years, males and females respectively). The 184 secrets that we obtained were analyzed for content, feelings expressed, and the person(s) they were shared with. Word count was taken as an indicator of the detail in which the secret was reported. Word counts were done separately for each secret if more than one had been reported. Females reported secrets in significantly more detail (mean = 133.27 words) than males (mean = 88.10 words; $t_{185} = 3.16$; $p < .01$).

The data were analyzed comparing differences between gender and age. Since there was a significant difference in the number of males and females in the study, comparisons were made using proportions. For age, two levels were selected: below and above age 18. The results are presented according to these categorizations.

Age Differences

The age-wise analysis revealed that individuals in the older age group reported more secrets regarding non-consensual sexual contact ($\chi^2 = 10.47$; $p < .001$). Significantly more individuals in the younger age group reported secrets to do with social embarrassment than in the older age group ($\chi^2 = 3.78$; $p < .05$). Also, significantly more individuals in the younger age group reported feelings of *shame* ($\chi^2 = 6.69$; $p < .05$), *happiness* ($\chi^2 = 4.36$; $p < .05$), and *determination* ($\chi^2 = 8.6$; $p < .01$). Significantly more individuals in the older age group reported feelings of *hurt* ($\chi^2 = 5.1$; $p < .05$). There were no differences between the age groups regarding the persons with whom they shared their secrets.

Gender Differences

Female subjects reported secrets in significantly more detail than male subjects. Mean word count for females was 133.27, and for males was 88.10 ($t_{185} = 3.16$; $p = .002$).

Significant differences were seen between males and females in the content areas of *non-consensual sexual contact* ($\chi^2 = 10.2$; $p < .001$) and *personal deficiencies, addictions, and desires* ($\chi^2 = 4.45$; $p < .05$). While only females reported secrets dealing with non-consensual sexual contact, more males reported secrets dealing with personal deficiencies, addictions, and desires. In the analysis of feeling across gender, more males reported feeling love than females ($\chi^2 = 4.3$; $p < .05$) while more females reported feeling disgust ($\chi^2 = 6.8$; $p < .05$).

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There were no differences between males and females regarding the sharing of the secrets. However, there were a significant number of persons who preferred not to share the secret with another person. Nevertheless, for both males and females, the secret was more likely to be shared with friends than with any other person; however, this difference was not statistically significant.

DISCUSSION

This study reports some preliminary data on the secrets held by college youth (in Mumbai, India). The purpose of the study was to explore the various themes that are held secret by this age group of persons. It was hypothesized that certain common themes would emerge as were predicted by Erikson's developmental theory of personality. It was also hypothesized that the feelings associated with the secret would be "negative". This is because the source of the energy precipitating the events held secret would be in the "shadow". Often individuals may find it difficult to integrate the content that lies in the "shadow", which often is then held as a secret, until the time that individuals shift developmentally, whereby they may integrate the content and this content previously held secret, may be shared with others.

Age Differences

It was observed that a large percentage of the lower age group preferred to keep the secret to themselves rather than share it with anybody else. If at all shared, there was a preference to share it with friends rather than with parents or other adults. This group was also more likely to report content of social embarrassment. The secrets reported by the older age group dealt mainly with romantic and interpersonal relationships. It was also observed that a larger proportion of respondents in the younger group reported feelings of shame, happiness, and determination. It stands to reason that these feelings follow unpleasant events that have caused embarrassment to the individual. However, when the individual is able to cope with these events, there are feelings of determination and happiness. Shame occurs when the shadow archetypes take over the individual's actions and precipitate actions that do not conform to societal norms. The individual thus fears the potential damage to the public identity (*persona*). In terms of the Eriksonian perspective, for the younger age group the secret thus allows the individual to maintain a sense of identity that is under threat of destruction if it were to be disclosed.

For the older age group, the data revealed support for the developmental stage of *Intimacy* vs. *Isolation*. The evidence for this comes from three sources. First the older group were more likely than the younger persons to share the secret with their friends. Second, the content of romantic and interpersonal relations was reported more frequently by the older age. Third, this group had significantly more persons reporting feelings of hurt. This group reported low feelings of shame and determination; which shows that the individuals were less embarrassed by their actions or the opinions they held. The individual wants to be a part of the social group, for which one is willing to share information that is very personal. The sense of hurt occurs in the context of losing this intimacy. The person may withhold information that

would result in isolation from this social group since this information may not conform to societal norms.

Gender Differences

The gender differences for word count was clearly supportive of the cultural truism that females were more likely to share their feelings, and were more likely share their feelings in greater detail. Other than this difference, there were hardly any differences in the proportions of males and females reporting different content. Of course, there was a marked difference between the genders in reporting non-consensual sexual contact. Another difference was that a significantly higher number of males reported secrets concerning smoking, drinking, experimenting with drugs, etc. These two differences again support cultural stereotypes. Research has shown that there is likely to be a far higher proportion of females (than males) who will experience unwanted sexual overtures and actual contact. Similarly, the socialization process (at least in India) provides far greater opportunity for males to experiment with drugs and alcohol.

The absence of differences is also interesting in that it suggests that the issues being dealt with by adolescents and young adults are determined more by their age than by their gender. This is clearly supportive of Erikson's conceptualization that it is the particular developmental stage rather than any other variable that will determine the issues that individual deals with.

The only other important gender difference observed was that more females reported feelings of disgust. This probably ties in with the content of non-consensual sexual contact reported by the females.

Significant differences were seen between males and females, in the content areas of non-consensual sexual contact and personal deficiencies, addictions, and desires. While only females reported secrets dealing with non-consensual sexual contact, more males reported secrets dealing with personal deficiencies, addictions, and desires. The analysis of the feelings revealed that more females reported feelings of disgust. This could be because the kinds of secrets that females hold may not be in accordance with the social norms. Males have reported more feeling of love.

There was no significant difference regarding the sharing of the secrets. However, it was seen that a number of persons did not want to share their secrets. However, for both males and females, the secret was more likely to be share with friends than with anyone else. So while individuals expect friends to understand and accept the secret, it would seem that these expectations are not held for other adults. One possibility is that the other adults are viewed as the keepers of society's norms and sharing the secret with them may contradict their persona or the self-image in society.

CONCLUSION

The data supported both hypotheses. We found that there is some evidence that suggests secrets may have a developmental basis. Further, the feelings associated with secrets are negative, thus providing support for our contention that the events precipitating the secret have their source in the shadow archetypes.

While our study has found some evidence that secrets may have a developmental basis, we still need to look at other age groups. It is important that comparisons be made across the entire age range and life span and have long term study before we are able to have finite conclusions.

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